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Conceptualising place in historical fact and creative fiction: rural communities and regional landscapes in Bernard Samuel Gilbert's 'Old England', c. 1910-1920.

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Abstract

The theme of place guides much exploration in rural history and local history. Attempts have been made to create definitions and typologies of place, but these have had to contend with the diverse, complex, and dynamic realities of historical pattern and process, local and regional. Nonetheless, historians and those in other disciplines have evolved different approaches to the concept. This study considers how these can inform the investigation of places existing in historical fact in particular periods in the past, and can do similarly for those places located contemporaneously in fictional constructions. Reference is made to various academic writings on place, including by the local historian, David Dymond. The analysis takes the work of the author of fiction, Bernard Samuel Gilbert. Gilbert, although relatively obscure now, incorporated a feature of special note into his later literary output, and one meriting greater attention. This was his personalised, reflective and explicitly articulated approach to forming and expressing place. Moreover, Gilbert's 'Old England', with its imaginary district of 'Bly', can be recognised as corresponding with landscapes and communities existing more broadly in the years up to and through the First World War, and with creations by other authors of regional fiction.

Place in fact

Local and regional historians, historical geographers and rural sociologists are among those who have contributed to conceptualising places as they existed in the countryside of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Approaches have been informed by various motivations, including those of singling out the essential factors and forces that influence and explain the nature and sense of a place, offering classifications that assist in defining and characterising place types and also comprehending and determining the course and impact of local and regional change. They have shared in an endeavour to establish the basis for a generalising set of ideas, a framework, or 'model', which can be applied widely as a starting point for investigation and interpretation. The results vary considerably in their composition and complexity.

Approaches to place tend to differ in their handling of scale and process. Two examples might be taken as representing markedly contrasting formulations. Charles Phythian-Adams, a regional historian, sets his spatial framing broadly, exploring the evidence for environmentally and culturally constituted 'cultural provinces' existing between the boundaries of county and nation up to the mid-nineteenth century. His project aims to stress the investigation of linkages and relationships, and thereby presents 'an agenda' that would bring a movement away from the customary preoccupation with single and bounded entities.¹ Dennis Mills, a historical geographer and community historian, finds value in the more localised 'open' and 'closed' typology, examining how settlement make-up is a product of 'human' factors – political, economic, social and cultural. His method is less preoccupied by the influence of the physical landscape and environment. The open and closed settlement model raises a number of problems, including finding application beyond a quite confined timeframe, and the weighting of its attention towards generally internally facing dynamics. This conceptualisation, however, at its most advanced, seeks to integrate the dimensions of settlement form, local social structure, and community identity.² Historians and historical geographers have found value in other concepts for understanding regions and landscapes, such as the *pays* or 'farming regions'.³ Reference to progress in other disciplines has been significant. The regional historian, J. D. Marshall, turns to the work of a number of geographers and sociologists, and their forming of different dimensions of place. This includes John Agnew's tripartite formulation. Place, for Agnew, comprises 'sense of place', representing the perspective of human perception and recognition, and subjective viewpoint. The concept also incorporates the dimension of 'locale', a spatial setting for social actions. Place means a precise 'location', and

1. Charles Phythian-Adams, ed., *Societies, Culture and Kinship, 1580-1850: Cultural Provinces and English Local History* (Leicester, 1991), pp. xii-23.
2. Andrew J. H. Jackson, 'The "Open-Closed" Settlement Model and the Interdisciplinary Formulations of Dennis Mills: Conceptualising Local Rural Change', *Rural History*, 23 (2012), 121-36; Sarah Holland, *Communities in Contrast: Doncaster and Its Rural Hinterland, c. 1830-1870* (Huntingdon, 2019), pp. 3-7; Dennis Mills, *Lord and Peasant in Nineteenth Century Britain* (London, 1980).
3. R. A. Butlin, 'Regions in England and Wales c. 1600-1914', in R. A. Dodgson and Butlin, eds, *An Historical Geography of England & Wales* (London, 1990), p. 226; J. Thirsk, *England's Agricultural Regions and Agrarian History, 1500-1750* (London: 1987).

there are issues about how that influences wider social interactions.⁴ The various conceptualisations that have been presented have had to confront a number of typical challenges: the degree to which the attributes of an individual and unique place will undermine the forcefulness, effectiveness and appeal of any generalising analysis; the robustness of the underpinning explanatory framework, and how well causal factors are understood and balanced, and are in turn linked through to effects; and the accommodation of change over time by any manner of classificatory and explanatory model. Despite this, there is an acceptance of the enduring role of place as 'a useful if rather elastic concept'. As Marshall adds: 'the local historian is doing nothing if he or she is not writing about it'.⁵

The dimension of change creates a particular problem for those developing a conceptualisation of historical place. Phythian-Adams points to the traditions and tendencies within 'English' local history to opt pragmatically for a shorter-term analytical perspective rather than the long view, and to trace the life courses of individual places through cycles, from origins and growth, to a culmination in decline and fall.⁶ This extends to another impulse, that of bringing timelines to a halt at some point in the nineteenth or early twentieth century, and thereby align the analysis with the well-established interpretation of an 'English' rural scene losing its senses of regional and local coherence and identity in the face of modernity. W. G. Hoskins, among others – historians and otherwise – talks of the disappearance of an 'old' community. Indeed the contextualisation and explanation of places overlaps here with the consideration of the closely related theme of community, whereby both place and community diminished simultaneously. They were, for Hoskins, as one: sharing in a loss of self-containment and self-sufficiency, and experiencing disintegration; and witnessing a parallel upheaval of ancient landscape.⁷ Community though, for Marshall, is different in its origins and emphasis as a concept. It is linkable with place in some contexts, but not universally and essentially so, and brings its own set of conceptual and methodological challenges.⁸

The diverse and contrasting approaches to local and regional place that exist have relevance as background context to this particular study. However, the analysis that follows turns most to the conceptual thinking of the historian David Dymond. He draws particular attention to the centrality of place as a theme, while also accepting and seeking to contend with its complexity and problems.⁹ His ideas are not unique to him, and can be found variously

4. J. D. Marshall, *The Tyranny of the Discrete: A Discussion of the Problems of Local History in England* (Aldershot, 1997), p. 99. Marshall draws upon the work of the political and cultural geographer, Jon Agnew, and this particular three-part conceptualisation of place: J. A. Agnew, *Place and Politics: The Geographical Mediation of State and Society* (London: 1987).
5. Marshall, *Tyranny of the Discrete*, p. 98.
6. Phythian-Adams, 'Introduction: An Agenda for Local History', in *Societies, Cultures and Kinship*, pp. 2-3; H. P. R. Finberg, *The Local Historian and His Theme* (Leicester, 1954), p. 9.
7. W. G. Hoskins, *Local History in England* (3rd edn, London, 1984), pp. 32-3; Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape* (London, 1955), pp. 231-2.
8. Marshall, *Tyranny of the Discrete*, pp. 100-1.
9. D. Dymond, *Writing Local History: A Practical Guide* (Chichester, 1981); *Researching and Writing History: A Practical Guide for Local Historians* (Salisbury, 1999); *Researching and Writing History: A Guide for Local Historians* (Lancaster, 2009). This article extends and advances a short piece celebrating Dymond's work: Andrew J.H.

within the works of others. Moreover, his approach is much less developed than other formulations. It is not a framework that supports systematic analysis, classification of types, or explanatory modelling of cause, effect and trajectory. It is more a set of ideas or a way of thinking about place. The more elemental framing is more flexible across, and less methodologically challenged by, different contexts of time and place. Dymond seeks to accommodate multi-level and inter-relating local and regional perspectives, to bridge the rural and the urban, and to allow for change and the longer view. He evolved his conceptualisation of place through versions of his guide to researching and writing history published between 1981 and 2009, which were in turn set against a background of developing thinking and practice in local and regional history.¹⁰ His *Writing Local History* of 1981 aims to extend what was on offer by way of guides, at a time of greater engagement with, and influence of, a broad range of disciplines other than history, and the presence and impact of community-led and 'bottom-up' popular participation. However, it had been 'seriously fractured and divided'.¹¹ Dymond prescribes a tri-partite conceptual framework for exploring local and regional pasts: time, theme and place. Place, for Dymond, is expressed most evidently and popularly in terms of discernible spatial scales. Individual places, groups of places, districts, and regions lent themselves to exploration, with the study of single places being clearly an attractive and practical proposition for many local historians. Essential, though, is the achievement of 'a clear sense of place'. This would be found through the conveying of a comprehensive and diverse impression of the 'total': 'an attempt to show how a community worked *as a whole* and how its constituent parts interwove in the complex texture of local life'. Moreover, giving centrality to the concept of place in a study acts to check overly specialist and singular thematic treatment that hampers the achievement of 'a coherent impression'.¹² The study of place, then, incorporates the dimension of scale and a sense of the total; as others have also observed.¹³

Dymond returns to place in his *Practical Guide* of 1999. In this he reflects on splits between local and regional historians and between the amateur and the academic, and the challenge of accommodating approaches aiming for more broader-ranging 'judgements and generalisations' about places, and those emphasising more localised appreciation of 'particularism' wherever it is found.¹⁴ Dymond addresses this by positioning the concept of place alongside that of space. This is especially significant, for, by locating place in the more dynamic notion of 'space', historians can better comprehend notions of 'distance', 'the outside world', and 'mental maps and horizons' in the past and through time. This reconceptualization

Jackson, 'The Concept of Place in Local History and Regional Literature: The Fictional, Early Twentieth-Century England of Bernard Samuel Gilbert', in Evelyn Lord and Nicholas Amor, eds, *The General Practice of Local History: A Festschrift for David Dymond* (Hertford, 2019), forthcoming. This present article adds further primary investigation, most especially referral to some of Gilbert's later works that are not held in a Lincolnshire public repository.

10. See, for example: John Beckett, *Writing Local History* (Manchester, 2007); Andrew J. H. Jackson, 'Local History and Local History Education in the Early Twenty-First Century: Organisational and Intellectual Challenges', *The Local Historian*, 38 (2008), 266-73; Kate Tiller, 'Local History Brought Up To Date', *The Local Historian*, 36 (2006), 150-5.
11. Dymond, *Writing Local History*, pp. ix, 1.
12. Dymond, *Writing Local History*, pp. 5-11.
13. Phythian-Adams, *Societies, Cultures and Kinship*, pp. xiii-2.
14. Dymond, *Researching and Writing History: A Practical Guide*, pp. 5-11.

of place within space is critical, and is further elaborated in explanations of how to approach localities in their wider worlds, and the groups of means through which a place makes and experiences internal and external connections: administrative and legal, geographical and economic, and personal and cultural.¹⁵ Dymond modifies his conceptualisation of place again in his guide of 2009. Place now is less set in space, but located within the central concern of the local historian, the study of 'people *in* their place'. He echoes Phythian-Adams here, who argues that 'the proper objects of local historical study are people in societies'.¹⁶ In Dymond's third edition of his guide, local history's grounding in physical and environmental determinism is still acknowledged, but is noticeably less prominent. In addition, the traditionally more place-led local history would become less distinguishable from the customarily more people-led community history, and become nearer to micro-history as an alternative approach to localised human relations. Furthermore, the emergence of a relatively more people-led local history was paralleling the mounting challenge of postmodernism, which drew attention to the individuality, subjectivity and provisionality of any study attempted on a place, and questioned the construction of generalising and formulaic conceptualisations.¹⁷

Dymond's conceptualisation shifted, and does not itself escape challenge. He refers to the likes of 'personal reconstructions', 'mental maps and horizons', and the historical 'imagination', but stops short of more demanding theoretical engagement with positionality and provisionality, and the subjective in the minds of historian and in their objects of study. As J. D. Marshall observes (and Dymond would be mindful of), the 'fact is that the local historian is still likely to experience difficulty with the concept of place'.¹⁸ This aside, over a number of decades and to differing degrees, Dymond highlighted four primary approaches to place that feature in the discipline of local and regional history: 'scale', 'the sense of the [total] place', 'place in space', and 'people in their place'.

Place in fiction

The investigation that follows applies Dymond's ways of thinking to the construction of place in regional fiction. Authors in this genre were concerned to varying extents with capturing and preserving local historical knowledge and understanding, sharing this motivation with historian contemporaries. Moreover, these writers of fiction to differing degrees shaped places in ways that are and have been mirrored in historical writing. Further, fictional writings have value as primary sources, that is, as repositories for factual information on, and the contemporary sentiments of, and towards, urban and rural localities and regions. Among the more

15. Dymond, *Researching and Writing History: A Practical Guide*, pp. 23-8.

16. Phythian-Adams, 'Introduction', pp. 2-19.

17. Pat Hudson, 'Regional and Local History: Globalisation, Post-modernism and the Future', *Journal of Regional and Local Studies*, 20 (1999), 16-18; A. J. H. Jackson, 'Problematising and Practising "Community-Focussed" Local History: On the Ermine, A Council Estate in Lincoln in the 1950s and 1960s', *International Journal of Regional and Local Studies*, 6 (2010), 48-71; Mills, 'Defining community', *Family & Community History*, 7 (2004), 8-11; George and Yanina Sheeran, 'Reconstructing Local History: The Sheeran's Reply', *The Local Historian*, 31 (2001), 49-50.

18. Marshall, *Tyranny of the Discrete*, p. 100.

sophisticated constructions is to be found in Bernard Samuel Gilbert's 'Old England', and its district of 'Bly'.¹⁹

Scholars from history, geography, literature and other disciplines have endeavoured to heighten understanding and appreciation of regional fiction.²⁰ It is a genre that requires, and indeed stimulates and rewards, interdisciplinary enquiry. However, that very need for methodologies that cross disciplinary boundaries has posed a challenge to the engagement of researchers. Meanwhile, regional fiction has not attracted the attention that it has perhaps merited, in that much of it would not be considered as passing the test of being 'great' in literary critical terms. Nonetheless, academic investigation undertaken through the later part of the twentieth century advanced comprehension and highlighted its potential. Regional fiction, measured in the output of regional novels, can be seen emerging as a popular genre through the second half of the nineteenth century, and driven by strong consumer demand. There was a dip in output during the First World War, with attention ranging elsewhere. The rate of production, though, swelled either side of the conflict, aligned with growing sensitivities towards, and a reaction against, the impact of change on the lives and landscapes of home regions.

The regional fiction relating to the countryside shows similarities of approach to its handling of people and places. The genre's authors articulated a wide, diverse and complex range of perspectives, and addressed the ambiguities and ambivalence to be found expressed in rural contexts and experiences.²¹ Provincial 'otherness' and the non-metropolitan are typical dimensions, and the accentuation of the contrasts between the urban and the rural. The forces of cultural character, distinctiveness and resilience also feature, weighed up against those bringing diminution, retreat and homogeneity. Degrees of regional political power or powerlessness figure here, contending with the challenge of internal and external economic

19. For an overview of Gilbert's pre-First World War writings, see A. J. H. Jackson, 'The Early Twentieth-Century Countryside of Bernard Samuel Gilbert: Lincolnshire Poet, Novelist, Playwright, Pamphleteer and Correspondent, 1911-14', *Midland History*, 41 (2016), 224-39; and for an examination of his newspaper correspondence on Lincoln on the eve of the Great War, see A. J. H. Jackson, 'Civic Identity, Municipal Governance and Provincial Newspapers: The Lincoln of Bernard Gilbert, Poet, Critic and "Booster", 1914', *Urban History*, 42 (2015), 113-29.
20. K. D. M. Snell, ed., *The Regional Novel in Britain and Ireland, 1800-1990* (Cambridge, 1998); K. D. M. Snell, *The Bibliography of Regional Fiction in Britain and Ireland, 1800-2000* (London, 2002).
21. Alan R. H. Baker, *Geography and History: Bridging the Divide* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 121-4; Butlin, 'Regions in England and Wales', 246-50; G. E. Cherry and J. Sheail, 'The Dynamics of Change', in E. J. T. Collins, ed., *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, VII* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 1590-1; Michael Bunce, 'Reproducing Rural Idylls', in Paul Cloke, ed., *Country Visions* (Harlow, 2003), pp. 15-19; Jeremy Burchardt, *Paradise Lost: Rural Change and Social Change since 1800* (London, 2002), pp. 25-34; Louis James, 'Landscape in Victorian Literature', in G. E. Mingay, ed., *The Rural Idyll* (London, 1989), pp. 69-70; W. J. Keith, *Regions of the Imagination: The Development of British Rural Fiction* (Toronto, 1988); David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London, 1998), pp. 38-42; Snell, 'The Regional Novel: Themes for Interdisciplinary Research', in Snell, *The Regional Novel*, pp. 1-53; Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London, 1973), pp. 197-214.

pressures. The senses of change, of the countryside being 'opened up' and of 'improvement', attract mixed interpretation, being viewed either as welcome or as hostile. Positive attributes and values could be ascribed to rural places and areas, with rural community life lending itself to romantic, sentimental and idealised constructions, and regional and country life fostering association, attachment and belonging. This said, writers did not evade confronting hardship and toil. The well-being or adversity facing regions, localities and communities were common themes, and how they were determined by the innate nature of physical environment, the soil and the climate; or by human agency and how people, land, wealth and power were distributed.

Of particular interest to this study are the ways in which place and space are formed and expressed in regional fiction, a dimension that has again attracted historians and geographers alike. It is clear that for much writing in this genre fictional districts and localities intersected with landscapes and communities that were recognisable and real. To a large part this was an inevitability, in that many of the authors were resident in, or strongly associated with the regions that they were writing about. Moreover, in the output of these writers fictional content interwove frequently and evidently with the personal and biographical. Equally, many authors exercised their express intent to promote the connection between their literary constructions and actual places. Other writers or agencies hastened to create ideas of 'the countries of', or produce 'guides to', that cultivated and commodified senses of cultural regions with literary associations.²² In the work of Henry Williamson, for example, there is a thin veil between his experiences of life in inner suburban London, Norfolk, and in North Devon, and the fictional narratives that he developed. The fading away of a traditional world around his fictionalised village of 'Ham', and its opening up and being stirred up by the intrusion of the modern world, are the output of both 'serious' observation and lived experience, as well as the story-telling impulse. Moreover, Williamson's literary legacy would later underpin, illustrate and legitimate the cultural construct and product of 'Tarka Country'.²³

The regional work of Thomas Hardy, meanwhile, has attracted far greater attention.²⁴ Interpretation of place and space in his output has been subjected to a number of different approaches. H. C. Darby, for example, examines 'Hardy Country' from the perspectives of a Wessex directly aligned with the distinctive if interrelating geological and agrarian regions of the county of Dorset. This can be seen corresponding with some of the dimensions of Dymond's analysis, and the development of ideas of scale and place in space, and as well as a composite and integrated sense of a total place. Turning from objective to more subjective geographies, John Barrell considers the senses of place and space being those constructed in the minds and words of characters and narrators. Here, the notion of 'people in their place' is more identifiable as the organising theme. By contrast again, Ralph Pike took as a focus Hardy's interest in and deployment of maps and mapping. This not only secured the

22. Snell, *Bibliography of Regional Fiction*, pp. 1-2; Snell, *The Regional Novel*, pp. 20-1.

23. A. J. H. Jackson, "'The Serious Historian' of the Village: Rural Tradition and Change as Recorded by Henry Williamson', *The Devon Historian*, 53 (1996), 11-15; Hugoe Matthews, *Henry Williamson: A Bibliography* (Tiverton, 2004); Anne Williamson, *Henry Williamson: Tarka and the Last Romantic* (Stroud, 1995).

24. John Barrell, 'Geographies of Hardy's Wessex', in Snell, *The Regional Novel*, pp. 99-118; H. C. Darby, 'The Regional Geography of Hardy's Wessex', *Geographical Review*, 38 (1948), 426-43; Ralph Pike, *Hardy's Geography: Wessex and the Regional Novel*, Basingstoke 2002; Keith Snell, *Spirits of Community: English Senses of Belonging and Loss, 1750-2000* (London, 2016), pp. 117-23. Snell in turn refers to the influential work of the sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies, and his notions of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*.

interrelating of the Wessex of both fact and fiction, but placed stress on lines of communication, and, with this, a greater emphasis on senses of the interactions between the local and global, the provincial and the capital, and the regional and national. In this way a fuller notion of the totality of place is reached. Keith Snell, meanwhile, considers the intersection of the concepts of place and community, and the nature of the latter in opposing rural and urban contexts. There is much in Hardy's writings relating to Dorset and London to understand how the author conceived of the countryside as being richer in its sense of community, if a quality in decline, and the metropolis as being characterised by its absence.

Gilbert's place

Through the years between 1921 and 1927 Bernard Samuel Gilbert published nine volumes of his 'Old England' series. The series would come to represent: 'A God's-eye view. A fair field full of folk. A work of art in four dimensions'. By 1926 he was projecting as many as six further volumes or 'parts'. The fifteen parts in total would form 'not sequels, but differing aspects of the same scene over the same period'. Moreover, once all of the parts had been completed 'OLD ENGLAND will be revised, rearranged, and republished, as One Work'.²⁵ However, Gilbert died in 1927 at the age of 45, and his grand scheme would not be fulfilled. The investigation that follows examines how Gilbert approached and expressed his understandings and ideas of place through these nine volumes.

Bernard Gilbert's literary career was a short one, lasting only fifteen years. It commenced at the age of 30, when he left his place of birth, Billingham, and his family's seed merchant's business. He lived for short spells in Woodhall Spa and then Lincoln, but most of his writing was produced while living in London from 1914 up to his death. He had established a diverse output before the First World War, working with different genres and media. He was less productive in the years between 1914 and 1918, while he was engaged in the service of the Ministry of Munitions. In the years following the First World War he was at his most active in terms of the number and size of his publications. Many of the aspects that can be seen in his later output were present in his earlier publications. These comprised his creative and imaginative representations of the countryside, and his critical and empathetic observations of local rural life.²⁶ From 1921, and chiefly through his 'Old England' series, Gilbert's contribution to the genre of rural literature would become more substantive, sophisticated and focussed.

In 1921, *Old England* was published. It adopted both the title that would come to be associated subsequently with the emerging series as a whole, as well as its subtitle: *A God's-Eye View of a Village*.²⁷ The publication deploys a set of elements to articulate its different perspectives on place. Among the preliminary pages is inserted a map, of 'Fletton Village', drawn by 'Collins' Geographical Department, Glasgow'. The map is a detail of a larger map of the wider parish as a whole, added among the volume's endpages. A page containing a short, untitled foreword gives the first opportunity to articulate what was intended of the subject, Fletton.²⁸ It is 'essentially a type, its people are to be found in every village'. The foreword appears to serve the function of a disclaimer: 'the author has taken the utmost pains to avoid

25. Bernard Gilbert, *Letters to America* (Oxford, 1926).

26. Jackson, 'The Early Twentieth-Century Countryside', 226-8.

27. Bernard Gilbert, *Old England: A God's-Eye View of a Village* (London, 1921).

28. Gilbert, *Old England*, p. v.

giving the offence to many rural friends which might arise from a work of this nature'. 'The author' lays claim to be an authentic voice, but not to have abused it; he 'was born and bred in the country, nearly all his life has been spent there, and he knows many villages intimately; but he has avoided the use of actual persons'. The statement also points out that parts of the volume had been published individually as a series, adding that letters had been received 'from places as far apart as Cumberland, Bucks, and Devon, from people who declared he must have been in their village'; but, again, adding that all can 'rest assured that they have not been personally put down as typical of Old England'.

The Preface of *Old England* gives a fuller articulation of the approach to place and Gilbert's motivations. Indeed the Preface's two pages gives a significant if brief declaration of intent for the series that would follow.²⁹ On the topic of the first volume, it is 'my idea of presenting an English village as a whole', if adding, 'I little guessed that it would lead me on to such an immense task'. Referring to Balzac, Gilbert would not make 'the heroic attempt to depict the nation of his day ... in these so much more complex days the attempt would be hopeless'. Focussing on a single village, however, he could accomplish his objective of showing 'therein the factors and problems of the land which are basic in rural England'. In addition, he chose not to develop a narrative, but a moment in time. He would, through this method, be able to manage the diversity and complexity; he would 'freeze my unit and exhibit it motionless. To show it in action would take as many novels as there are characters'. The Preface proceeds to conceptualise the village unit:

The village is our largest social unit, being a society in which every person knows everything about everyone, and in which the whole of the members are in personal relation. Our next unit is the small market-town of some 4000 inhabitants, in which are a number of distinct circles; but the village, running up to 1000 souls, is a self-contained cosmos, a large family, and has no *beyond*. Its soul is coherent and complete.

Gilbert restates his static perspective, situating it 'at one moment in the war', and forming a 'camera-obscura presentiment'. Furthermore, the content would comprise 'the multitudinous intrigues, ambitions, desires, disputes, interests, and all the social, political, financial, sexual and religious factors which thread the fabric so closely'. Gilbert then lists a series of authors that had provided inspiration, in addition to Balzac: Bunyan, Defoe, Landor, Hardy, Crabbe and Masters. However, none of them had brought together the three intersecting elements that he was seeking to combine: the chronologically 'static form'; a single and discernible place; and characters that express themselves, the nature of their personal relationships, and 'together set forth their village as an entity'. Gilbert gives further amplification: 'In my youth I was taught that there was an omniscient Being to whom everything was present at each instant'. Articulated in this way he was seeking 'a state of complete comprehension' ... 'a knowledge of each character and each relationships and a simultaneous view of every one of a vast complexity of interweaving strands'. Gilbert concludes his concise Preface with another turn of view. He was endeavouring not to cast heroes and heroines, nor villains, or characters being of relatively more importance than others. Moreover, this was contextualised in a particular and positive societal construction:

29. Gilbert, *Old England*, pp. vii-viii.

It is the ancient democracy of the Feudal System, the one which has stayed longest in our history and which has its roots deeper and more firmly in the soil of Old England than town-dwellers can guess or know.

After the Preface is a page entitled an 'Extract from County Directory (1914)', which opens: 'Fletton (not to be confused with Fletton, Hunts) is a parish and village on the road from Bly to Barkston, eight miles south-west of Bly (the nearest railway station) in the Western Division of the County'. The extract thereafter follows the format of the entries typically associated with contemporary commercial directories, with references to the church, patronage, chapels, the main landowners and seats, parish acreage, postal and carrier, services, schools, a list of private residents, inns, and local office holders.³⁰ Landownership is dominated by the holdings of the local Earldom. The greater part of the volume is then comprised of 192 pieces of verse and prose in the voice of 192 of the adult residents of Fletton. The work then closes with a 'Who's Who', giving a brief listing for each of those characters: with name, marital status, and in many instances political-party and religious-denominational affiliation. He also includes a list of 51 'Principal' families of the parish and their family trees, listed alphabetically, and seemingly of all classes, from the labourers to the 'Eleventh Earl'.³¹

Gilbert's first volume had set out what Dymond and other local historians would recognise as constituting three of the main approaches to place. Fletton, his archetypal or 'model' of an English village was revealed: its scale, a sense of its whole, and the positioning of people in that place. In 1922 Gilbert published his second volume of the 'Old England' series, *King Lear at Hordle*. In this subsequent work Gilbert alters and reorientates his treatment of place in a number of regards, in particular adding the perspective of place in space. The dimension of scale, now, sees a movement away from the level of the tightly local, single-village centred and smallest of settlement units. The spatial focus extends more broadly to that of the wider fictional district of Bly, and includes a map of the area among the opening pages. It gives a sense of the entirety if not to level of detail of Fletton, in volume one: 'I have drawn upon other villages, so that, taken in conjunction with *Old England*, and the volumes that are to follow, the reader may envisage the diversity of the rural scene'.³² Gilbert takes a more precise and developed approach to setting places in their wider geographical space. He lays out a skeleton description for Bly, listing its places and population sizes, the area's principal seats, and a who's who list of the residents of the district mentioned in the volume. In the book can be found Fletton again, and the places that are the setting for the six plays and six monologues and duologues that make up the *King Lear at Hordle*: Hordle, itself, but also, from across the various areas of Bly district: Tanvats, Carrington, Marshfellowton, Belton, Thorpe Tilney, Holt in the Marsh, Herries St James, Pantacks, South Winch, High Morton, and Wong.

In *King Lear* Gilbert advances his examination of wider scale and setting through the exploration of two sub-districts. Moreover, he expresses a more sensitive locating of people in their place. It is clear that his Bly was constructed to attract association with most landscape and community types: 'the map shows it running up from the sea, through successive belts of marsh, fen, sand, heath, moor, limestone, embracing most kinds of soil and methods of cultivation, and nearly all classes of countryman'.³³ Gilbert groups these belts in turn into two broad zones of Bly, a familiar higher and lower land dichotomy – physical and cultural:

30. Gilbert, *Old England*, pp. ix-xi.

31. Gilbert, *Old England*, pp. 257-97.

32. Bernard Gilbert, *King Lear at Hordle and other Rural Plays* (London, 1922).

33. Gilbert, *King Lear*, p. xviii.

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In the fens and marshes the soil is rich, and from five to ten times as high in price as the heath and the wold. There are few baronial seats; partly because, only having been recently reclaimed, they never came under feudal sway; partly because they were parcelled into small plots when drained; and finally, because the peasantry are fierce individualists who cling onto their holdings at all cost.

This is to be found juxtaposed with, elsewhere:

[On the] high-land labourers are more servile; they have no chance of starting small holdings on that thin soil, which can only be farmed successfully in large tracts. Their land is well wooded, with great stretches of grass, and lends itself to hunting and shooting and picturesque homes; and it is there that the feudal barons reign supreme.

As a further perspective Gilbert expresses an awareness of how sense of place might be received by the contemporary readers and consumers of *King Lear at Hordle*. This is reflected in a passage in which he tackles the tendency to stereotype:

City writers generally view our villages as incredibly innocent 'Sweet Auburns': assemblages of thatched roofs, topped with a spire and flanked by a hall. They see work going on at a leisurely pace, poultry occupying the streets, red-cheeked children at play, and feel that here is the simple life. When they discover with what brutal plainness the two great impulses of human nature take effect – preservation and reproduction – they call the villages licentious: but their state is far healthier than that of our cities, which are – with regard to sex – cesspools scented to hide their smell.³⁴

Furthermore, Gilbert also expresses a sense of duty to represent the art and artistic in the countryside. He sought to both elevate it and give it a voice:

Rural England is full of humour and strong originality, and with encouragement, an immense amount of village art would spring out of the soil. I have known many peasants endowed with the creative faculty who would, under better conditions, have blossomed; but the lack of appreciation condemned them to sterility. Our villages have Shakespeares who never find a stage, Bunyans who never reach a publisher, and Chaucers whose tales remain verbal.³⁵

1922 also saw the publication of the third volume of Gilbert's series, *Tyler of Barnet*. In this he elaborates further on some of the motivations that were driving his output. Although fictionalised, he saw his literary creation as an opportunity to convey a personal, directly observed and authentic representation of the countryside and rural life:

For thirty years I have lived in such a district ... I knew all the parishes well, and several of them very intimately, and there were few local inhabitants with whom I was unacquainted. I spent innumerable hours in cottages and farm-house kitchens, in cobblers'

34. Gilbert, *King Lear*, p. xvii.

35. Gilbert, *King Lear*, p. xvi.

and barbers' shops, and inns ... and attending ... all those gatherings that form so large a part of country life.³⁶

In *Tyler* Gilbert places a second village under closer scrutiny, the fen-edge Low Barnet. His description of Fletton was relatively self-contained in its viewpoint, falling short of setting the place in its wider landscape. This is not the case for Barnet. The settlement, like Gilbert's birthplace of Billingham, faced the fens, and in *Tyler* he discusses at some length on this environment and the cultural associations that it had attracted:

To many people the Fens are dull because there are no contours to break the view, but they have a calm dignity of their own that gradually steals over the senses. Their effects are not unlike the ocean, and their sunrises and sunsets can be wonderful, as Turner knew. But strangers find the Fens ... and the soil, being black, does not lend itself to the play of light and shade as in hilly country.³⁷

Moreover, Gilbert's evident attachment to the fens is further expressed through appreciation of contemporary and non-fictional realities. He was troubled by what had been lost as a result of reclamation and enclosure, comparing an idealised past with that existing in the present:

In those days the Fens were beautiful, not only on account of the wild life which abounded, but because of the diversity of the untrammelled landscape. Everything now is bent to a utilitarian end; the soil is so rich that no patch is left uncultivated, and trees – as robbers of plant food – have been practically exterminated ... and the successors of the fen-men are the factory workers of Barkston, who line the banks of the Gulland at the week-ends.

In *Tyler of Barnet* Gilbert also turns some attention to the wider district and its market town, also taking the name Bly: 'England is divided into counties ... and it is the market-town, with its surrounding area of agricultural villages, which constitutes a political unit'. Gilbert's Bly, his 'Old England' was being envisaged as a spatial model: 'Throughout England you find these market-towns at regular intervals, containing up to twenty thousand inhabitants, and having twenty to fifty parishes in their district'. This said, the market town's sense of itself was not the same as those of villages like Fletton and Barnet: the 'reciprocal knowledge cannot be that of the village, where everyone knows about everything about everybody, but it comes as near as is necessary.³⁸ In *Tyler* Gilbert included the last of his prefaces and introductions in which, through the first three volumes of 'Old England', he had openly reflected upon and shared his deliberations upon the grand scheme that he had embarked upon, its form and purpose. A section in *Tyler* amplifies further what Gilbert was aiming to achieve in his developing multi-volume construction:

In this series I am using various methods of literary presentment in succession, and though each of the books must stand on its own feet, they should be read in turn to obtain the desired effect, and none of them can be completely comprehended until the last volume has appeared. Instead of being mere sequels in time, they form extensions in space, with

36. Bernard Gilbert, *Tyler of Barnet* (London, 1922), p. xiii.

37. Gilbert, *Tyler*, pp. 1-2.

38. Gilbert, *Tyler*, p. xii.

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successive thickenings of texture and a working in three planes, so that the result shall be a solid rather than a flat presentment. My object is to place the reader in the position of an inhabitant of my district, and ... he will have been provided with the material for such an extension.³⁹

Gilbert adds to his three dimensional conceptualisation of space later in the preface, and also signals an important shift of his position of space in time that he had projected in volume one:

It is this thronging hive, this pulsating life, which I am segregating as in a crystal globe. I had first intended to do this by presenting the events of one day, but discovered that this would not suffice to realise my conception. I was therefore obliged to expand the period over which the scenes extend to – roughly – the seven years from 1910 to 1917, and reader of my series must consider himself as an inhabitant of my district during those years, and one who examines with due reflection the neighbourhood in which he is dwelling.⁴⁰

Two years later, in 1923, Gilbert published *The Rural Scene*, a collection of poetry. For this work most of the content is a republication of poems that had appeared before and during the First World War. However, in an exercise of people-in-their-place setting, each of the poems was retitled by Gilbert. Every poem would now bear the name of particular character, with the verses conveying their voices and thoughts, monologue-like. *The Rural Scene* does not contain any further deliberation by the author on his conceptualisation of place. He notes that the 'characters are referred to in their respective villages which in turn are duly mapped', with the map of Bly appearing for a second if final time in the series. The work could be read alone as a collection of poetry, or a part of 'a very considerable whole'; at which point Gilbert refers readers to the description of the 'scheme at length' in *Tyler*.⁴¹ However, he does continue to add materially to his spatial construction. In the closing pages he includes the short descriptions of the 33 settlements mentioned in *The Rural Scene* and in previous volumes, extracted from the *County Directory*. The book also ends with another 'who's who' of the characters making an appearance in volume four.⁴² The sections of introduction and preface that are included in *Rural Scene* are given over most to Gilbert's thoughts on the 'Old England' series as a political project. In his view capitalism and socialism had both failed to deliver progress and well-being. He prescribed a return to a 'merry' England of the Feudal system, which could be found retaining a foothold in the countryside:

the kind of life that is led under our Feudal system becomes of interest to those who wish to stay in these islands. As I am showing in my 'Old England' Series, that life is unchanging. The peasants get bicycles and Sunday papers, the farmers have telephones and motor-cars, but the speech changes little, and the customs, manners and habits hardly at all. They who live under the Feudal System have their duties, occupations, and amusements clearly defined.⁴³

39. Gilbert, *Tyler*, pp. ix-x.

40. Gilbert, *Tyler*, p. xiii-xiv.

41. Bernard Gilbert, *The Rural Scene* (Collins, 1924), p. 35.

42. Gilbert, *Rural Scene*, pp. 215-36.

43. Gilbert, *Rural Scene*, p. 28. Gilbert's stance on radical extremes and the existing political parties is set out more fully elsewhere, including his championing of a back-to-the-land

Gilbert also explains the significance of *The Rural Scene* as part of a wider cultural project. In *King Lear* he had given emphasis to humour: 'Their conversation is shot with it, and the tales that they continually tell are not like the town-workers' stories ... In the village every one knows everything about everybody, and nothing is hid. It is the democracy of the feudal System'.⁴⁴ Extending this further, the poems in the *Rural Scene* were intended to incorporate the emotions of a community in its native speech', at a time when 'dialect is rapidly vanishing before universal education' and when the 'gramophone has found its way into many cottages and most farmhouses'. He felt that this decline could be arrested, given the appreciation of dialect among farmers and labourers: 'the verses were in the simple language of their everyday speech, and expressed the feelings they all understood'.⁴⁵

The year 1923 would also see into print volume five, *Cross Lights*. There is no introduction or preface this time to contextualise the content. A 'Publishers' Announcement' in the endpages describes it as a collection of 'tales', comprising thirty-three short pieces, again relating to various people and places across Bly district. Gilbert's fifth book in the series does follow with some of the explanatory appendices associated with earlier works, adding further to the geography of Bly. There is the reproduction of the description of Bly District, extracted from the *Barkston County Directory*. In this Gilbert again weights the content towards discussion of the fens, or former fen. It is not as evocative and poignant in manner as the prologue in *Tyler*, but nonetheless touches on critical issues, such as over cropping and reduced fertility, and the reduction of traditional activities: with 'the drainage of the fens many former sources of wealth have lessened: geese were largely bred and their quills and feathers plucked ... Rabbit warrens which used to abound in the sands of the wolds have been broken up. The taking of wild fowl has much fallen off'.⁴⁶ In addition, his 'Who's who' lists the names of all the characters who are named in *Cross Lights*, and adds against each other volume numbers if they has already made an appearance in any of the preceding four books.

In 1924 Gilbert would give full and sole treatment to Bly district's market town. This work, volume six, is quite different again in construction.⁴⁷ It is a story of one day, a market day. Through a series of moments in time, the activities of a particular Bly inhabitant is caught and represented, from the rising of Canon Makepeace at 7 am to the gathering of a collection of individuals at 11.45 in the evening to see in Christmas Day with a carol in one of the war years. As in *Cross Lights*, an introduction and preface are not included. Appendices appear again, though, with the extract from the *County Directory* on Bly, the town, and the familiar list of inhabitants appearing in the body of the work. This sixth volume adds a further map, of the market town of Bly, and a detailed key to all buildings offering a service, public or commercial, together with street and bridge names. The seventh volume was published in the following year, 1925. *Canon Makepeace* is a single novel, rather than a collection.⁴⁸ It considers a relatively limited range of individuals, and its focus is on character study rather than the

movement and the establishment of a Rural Party to represent the interests of 'Old England': Christopher Turnor and Bernard Gilbert, *Where Are We Going? A Manifesto for All Who Live on or by the Land* (London, 1923).

44. Gilbert, *King Lear*, pp. 3-4.

45. Gilbert, *Rural Scene*, pp. 32-4.

46. Gilbert, *Cross Lights*, pp. 308-20.

47. Bernard Gilbert, *Bly Market: Moving Pictures of a Market Day* (London, 1924).

48. Bernard Gilbert, *Canon Makepeace* (London, 1925).

landscapes, communities and their peoples within them that are typical and prominent themes of the earlier books. Moreover, the volume has no explanatory introductory or closing pages. In 1926 Gilbert's eighth volume was published.⁴⁹ It presents yet another and contrasting perspective on Bly. The volume first featured in publishers' notices in preceding works in the series, entitled *The Outer View*. Appearing eventually as *Letters to America*, it takes an epistolary form, a collection of writings addressed to an acquaintance in the US from a fictional author living in the Bly village of Wong. The work is accompanied by very little by way of any accompanying or supplementary explanation or information from Gilbert. In the following year the ninth and final volume was published, Gilbert's *Peers Woodman*.⁵⁰ It is a script for a one-act drama, and by far the shortest of the nine. The play, part comedy and part fantasy, is located in the parish of Long-Martin, in the District of Barkston to the west of Bly. The place, on the Isle of Friston, finds Gilbert again upon his favoured landscape, fen, for one final time. A few lines of preamble indicate that it is set in an 'afternoon in the twentieth century'. However, the publication contains no other accompanying information for readers.

This analysis is based on Gilbert's guide to how he constructed place, preparing readers through his prefaces, introductions and appendices. The discussion has not strayed into what would be a subsequent and major project in its own right, that of examining how place is formed and expressed in the body of the stories, plays and poems themselves. It is appropriate, though, to make some reference to the potential of this, especially for those later volumes that lack author explanation and contextualisation. In *Cross Lights*, for example, one character would observe from an air balloon (echoing a section of Gilbert's explanation of place in *Tyler*): 'the market town of Bly lay almost exactly in the centre of its district, and he perceived for the first time that it was indeed a unit', and, moreover: 'one would see all rural England divided into these agricultural units, each with its market-town and its quota of parishes'.⁵¹ In *Letters to America*, the central character and letter author is a Londoner and 'Exile' to the countryside. Bly as a place and space is viewed with metropolitan contempt: 'not only is it wedged off on the East Coast, but it's on the way to nowhere ... it is, I suppose, the last remnant of the olden days'. Thorpe adds: 'Someday, I suppose, England will get rid of these backwaters that obstruct progress'.⁵² The plot of *Peers Woodman*, meanwhile, features the experience of a 'commission', and their task of investigating the 'present lamentable state of affairs in rural England'.⁵³ In this study of a people in their place, the 'Ancient', Melchizedec Peers, and other neo-Druidic folk are placed centrally in a play heavy and rich in stereotype and parody.

Broader and deeper study of the main-body text of Gilbert's volumes would allow for a clearer positioning of his work in the wider genre of rural fiction writing, including pursuing some of the references to other authors that he acknowledged as sources of inspiration. In addition, extended analysis would support exploration of aspects of his scheme that are either omitted from his prefaces, introductions and other supplementary notes and appendices, or only touched upon in passing. Gilbert's adoption of the 'God's-eye view' is worthy of closer examination. Comparison can be made with T. F. Powys, for example, whose *Mr Weston's Good Wine* (1927) was also published in the 1920s. The God's-eye perspective is a faculty granted by Powys to the central character, Mr Weston, whose personal knowledge of local

49. Bernard Gilbert, *Letters to America* (Oxford, 1926).

50. Bernard Gilbert, *Peers Woodman* (Oxford, 1927).

51. Bernard Gilbert, *Cross Lights: The Tales* (London, 1923).

52. Gilbert, *Letters*, pp. 2, 31, 35-7.

53. Gilbert, *Peers Woodman*, pp. 5 and 28.

inhabitants is extensive and detailed.⁵⁴ Gilbert's emerging scheme can also be placed in the tradition of single-village-based fictional studies. The regional novel genre certainly had much to offer by way of this, and it might be asked how the likes of Fletton, Barnet and Bly, the market town, compare with depictions by other authors? In Hardy alone there are accounts of various places, with descriptions of what made them distinctive and different from one another, and indications of how well they were fairing in the face of change, for example: Mellstock in *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), Little Hintock in *The Woodlanders* (1887), Marlott and Flintcomb-Ash in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), Marygreen and Christminster in *Jude the Obscure* (1895), and the regional market town of Casterbridge in *Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886). Where, it follows, do Gilbert's places sit on the rural-fiction spectrum, between the representations of those communities that are benign in character, if experiencing decline, and those localities that are portrayed as bleak and anti-pastoral?⁵⁵ In addition, it is surprising perhaps that Gilbert does not discuss his approach to place-naming, given the extent to which he explains so many other aspects of his scheme. The choice of name for the district and central market town invites curiosity. Is it a contracted form of Blithe? This would seem fitting, not least because of the positive and amenable associations that the word carries in its historical and popular uses as a word and name. Indeed it is clear that Gilbert appeared to be aiming to produce a balanced portrayal of the district and its constituent localities: some of the harshness, evidently, but also much of the humour. Equally, however, Bly might simply be a contraction of Billingham, Gilbert's birthplace.⁵⁶

Conclusion

Unfortunately, Gilbert's grand scheme did not fully materialise. The Lincolnshire-derived Bly did not secure a place in literature, in the same way that other now well-known literary landscapes have done today. Gilbert, and his pre-First World imaginary rural world, disappeared into obscurity. In 1927, a contemporary would write upon Gilbert's death:

The work he had projected was immense ... That microcosm was to contain everything, and there humanity had been stable and unchanging for nearly a thousand years. His

54. Keith, *Regions of the Imagination*, pp. 129-34; Snell, *Spirits of Community*, pp. 222-3.

55. John Barrell, 'Geographies of Hardy's Wessex', pp. 107-12; James, 'Landscape in Nineteenth-Century Literature', pp. 74-5; Keith, *Regions of the Imagination*, pp. 89-95; Snell, *Bibliography of Regional Fiction*; Snell, *Spirits of Community*, pp. 109-27; Williams, *Country and the City*, pp. 201-14.

56. Lincolnshire dialect and place name dictionaries do not appear to offer much assistance here. The Blythe in the Lincolnshire place name of Bythe Close is described as stemming from the Old English word meaning, among other things, 'happy, gay and sprightly', in E. H. Gooch, *Place Names of Lincolnshire: Their Historical Meaning and Origin* (Spalding, 1947), p. 22. It was a talk by the current author on Gilbert to the Billingham History Group on 24 April 2017 that prompted speculation among members that Bly could be Billingham contracted. Moreover, this might be grounded further upon the observation of the Group that many of the street names for the map of the market town of Bly in *Bly Market* bear exact or close resemblance to those in Billingham today.

method was to go back to the same scenes, the same situations, in novels, stories, plays and poems, cutting deeper, from new angles, the bas relief with which he had started.⁵⁷

To differing degrees local and regional historians of the rural scene have consciously or sub-consciously wrestled with the handling of place. Phythian-Adams, for example argued that such historians, in fact what he preferred to call 'historians of societies', 'should actually worry at what they are doing conceptually'. To conceptualise is not a self-indulgence, but a way of seeing through the problems and constraints emerging from a wholly pragmatic approach building the empirical research base.⁵⁸ Dymond sought to provide an accessible and simplified way forward, for rural and urban settings, and particularly for the small or smaller scale contexts that generally attract the attention of historians drawn to more localised spatial foci.

Regional fiction writers, in common with local historians, oral historians, and others, such as geographers and sociologists, have shared a fascination with place, and associated themes, like the passing of time, the character and condition of peoples and communities, and forms and processes playing out over geographical areas. The rural has also been a special attraction, with the same categories of authors expressing and evaluating continuity and change, progress and loss, and the stereotypical and unique. Dymond and Gilbert's writings both understand the position and power of place, in both fact and in the imagination. Place is, in part, something physically determined and is itself a physical expression. It is also a creation of human forces and relationships, internal and external. In addition, place is a construction within the minds and mentalities of peoples. Also present for both authors are some of the challenges of approaching place, such as balancing the general and the particular, giving due accord to both the rural and the urban, and weighing up the forces of environmental determinism against the wit and will of people.

Gilbert is relatively unusual among writers of rural fiction in leaving behind an openly expressed and reflective elaboration of his methodology, and one that was systematic and sophisticated. Moreover, its comprehension can be approached through the framework set out by Dymond, with Gilbert understanding the significance of interconnecting scales, spatial context, the totalities of individual places, and the lives of people in their places. Not all can be subsumed under a local historian's gaze, however. Gilbert was after all, a producer of fiction through metropolitan publishers, with a reputation to build and to sustain, and a market sector to capture. Local historians are not and cannot be unheeding of their consumers, but Gilbert was clearly very sensitive to how his crafting and shaping of people and places would be interpreted, associated with, and attracted to. In Gilbert's 'Old England', past was interwoven with present, and fiction interwoven with fact:

Whether the community needs the artist at all is a question which has been discussed through the ages, and I don't propose to touch on it here, except to remark that, without a chronicler, generation follows generation into oblivion, and they vanish from the scene for ever.⁵⁹

57. John Rodker, 'Bernard Gilbert', *Poetry*, 30 (1927), 274-5.

58. Phythian-Adams, *Societies, Cultures and Kinship*, p. xiii.

59. Gilbert, *King Lear*, p. xv.

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